Lecture 26: Is Expressivism Relativism or Nihilism? Is Relativism Nihilism?

I. Blackburn and Gibbard on Why Expressivism Is Not Relativism

Suppose I encounter a member of the Taliban, and we have the following exchange:

me: “Women should be educated.”
the Taliban: “Women shouldn’t be educated.”

It looks as if, by the lights of an expressivist such as Blackburn or Gibbard, I’ve expressed a certain attitude, the Taliban member has expressed a conflicting attitude, and that’s all there is to say about it. According to my system of sentiments I’m right and he’s wrong, according to his system of sentiments he’s right and I’m wrong, and that’s the end of the matter. So why isn’t this relativism?

Recall Lyons’ distinction between agent and critic relativism (as applied to moral utterances):

agent relativism: When I say, “It is wrong for agent A to φ in circumstance C,” what I say is valid (that is, true or justified) iff, according to A’s moral framework, it is wrong for A to φ in C.

critic relativism: When I say, “It is wrong for agent A to φ in circumstance C,” what I say is valid (that is, true or justified) iff, according to my moral framework, it is wrong for A to φ in C.

Clearly expressivism is not a form of agent relativism. Is it, though, a form of critic relativism?

• Here is an attempt to formulate Gibbard’s theory as a version of critic relativism:

Gibbardian critic relativism: When I say, “It is irrational for A to φ in C,” what I say is valid iff, according to the system of norms that I accept, A is forbidden from φ-ing in C.

But this can’t be right. The problem is over how to interpret ‘valid’:

In Wise Choices, Apt Feelings, Gibbard doesn’t think that moral utterances can be true, so we can’t interpret ‘valid’ to mean ‘true’.

However, if we interpret ‘valid’ to mean ‘justified’ (or ‘rational’), then we have a normative term appearing outside the scope of a belief-operator, so we need to go expressivist about my utterance of the sentence labeled ‘Gibbardian critic relativism’ above.

But then my uttering that sentence amounts to my expressing my acceptance of a system of norms that permits someone to say, “It is irrational for A to φ in C,” iff that person accepts a system of norms that forbids A from φ-ing in C. And I may well not accept such a system of norms.

• Maybe things are easier with Blackburn. Recall his way of constructing moral truth from §6.3 of Spreading the Word:

Blackburn’s account of moral truth: When I say, “It is wrong for A to φ in C,” what I say is true iff the best possible moral sensibility contains disapproval of A’s φ-ing in C.

With that in mind, here is an attempt to formulate his theory as a version of critic relativism:

Blackburnesque critic relativism: When I say, “It is wrong for A to φ in C,” what I say is true iff, according to a maximally improved version of my moral sensibility, Bool(A’s φ-ing in C).

But the ‘my’ is doing no work in the above formulation, once we have accepted Blackburn’s Hume-inspired argument that the best possible version of my moral sensibility and the best possible version of your moral sensibility will entirely overlap. So it’s not clear this counts as a version of relativism.
The problem with both of these attempts to pigeon-hole Gibbard and Blackburn as relativists is that a crucial element of relativism is the claim that no moral framework is better or more correct than any other. But since this claim is a normative claim, Gibbard and Blackburn will go expressivist about it. So, for them, moral relativism is itself a normative position. Moreover, it is not a normative position that they accept.

On the one hand, this move allows Blackburn and Gibbard to avoid the charge that they are moral relativists.

On the other hand, it is tempting to say that they are only able to avoid this charge because of a relativistic element in their theory. So maybe all this shows is the inadequacy of the standard ways of characterizing relativism.

II. Lewis on Why Quasi-Realism Is Fictionalism (and Hence a Form of Nihilism)

Suppose Blackburn’s quasi-realist project has succeeded perfectly on its own terms. Then the quasi-realist can, and will, echo everything the moral realist says.

Rosen’s question: So what, then, makes the quasi-realist not simply a realist?

Lewis’ reply: We shouldn’t look for something the realist says that the quasi-realist will not echo; rather, we should look for something the quasi-realist says that the realist will not echo.

In particular, even though at the end of the day the quasi-realist apes everything the realist says, at the beginning of the day the quasi-realist starts by expressing his commitment to projectivism.

According to Lewis, this statement of projectivism acts as a disowning preface that turns the quasi-realist’s later realist-sounding assertions into fictive assertions of the sort uttered by a moral fictionalist. It’s as if the quasi-realist started out by saying, “Let’s make believe that moral realism is true, though it isn’t.”

More formally, Lewis argues as follows (see p. 319):

1. One aim of quasi-realism is (to earn the right) to say what the moral realist says. [premise]
2. To say what the moral realist says is either to be a moral realist or to make-believedly be a moral realist. [premise]
3. So, an aim of quasi-realism is either to be a moral realist or to make-believedly be a moral realist. [follows from 1, 2]
4. Another aim of quasi-realism is to avoid the errors of moral realism. [premise]
5. So, the quasi-realist aims to make-believedly be a realist. [follows from 3, 4]

An advantage of Lewis’ proposal on quasi-realism’s behalf: it helps explain what’s happening when the quasi-realist says one thing at the beginning of the day (“Moral statements do not express beliefs”) and then appears to take it back at the end of the day (“Moral statements express beliefs”).

A disadvantage of Lewis’ proposal: his argument that quasi-realism is fictionalism is not very convincing.

problem #1: Moral fictionalism = moral nihilism + a fictionalist account of moral thought and talk. But Lewis completely neglects that ‘thought’ part of ‘thought and talk’.

problem #2: On Lewis’ interpretation, what the quasi-realist holds to be really true is what he states in his disowning preface. So at most Lewis shows that quasi-realism = emotivism + a fictionalist account of non-basic moral talk.

problem #3: Is the disowning preface just the statement of projectivism, or does it also include the statement of the various quasi-realist constructions of moral discourse?

problem #4: A statement of a philosophical position such as projectivism is nothing like a standard disowning preface, such as “I shall say lots of things I don’t believe, starting now” or “Let’s make believe the Sherlock Holmes stories are true, though they aren’t.”
III. Boghossian on Why Relativism Is Nihilism

According to Boghossian, sometimes the rejection of a certain class of facts (or of a certain type of entity) leads us to embrace relativism, and sometimes it leads us to embrace nihilism.

_example 1:_ When Einstein convinced us that there is no such thing as absolute simultaneity, we became relativists about simultaneity.

_example 2:_ When we decided that there are no such things as witches, we didn’t become relativists about witches, but rather became nihilists about them.

What explains our different reactions in these two cases?

_Boghossian’s hypothesis:_ There exists a relativistic cousin of absolute simultaneity (namely: simultaneity relative to a spatio-temporal frame of reference) that “plays something like the same sort of role as [absolute] simultaneity did in our theory of the world.” By contrast, there does not exist a relativistic cousin of witchhood that plays anything like the role that witches were supposed to play in our theory of the world.

Now suppose we reject the existence of absolute facts about right and wrong. Should this lead us to become moral relativists, or to become moral nihilists? Given Boghossian’s hypothesis, this turns on whether there exists a relativistic cousin of rightness/wrongness that can play somewhat of the same role as absolute rightness/wrongness was supposed to play in our lives.

The obvious candidate: take ‘___ is wrong relative to moral code M’ to be the relativistic cousin of ‘___ is absolutely wrong’. But, Boghossian claims, the former cannot be used to play the same role in our lives as the latter, since the latter is a normative predicate, whereas the former is a descriptive predicate “that carries no normative import whatsoever.”

Boghossian’s conclusion: “There is no half-way house [between absolutism and nihilism] called ‘moral relativism,’ in which we continue to use normative vocabulary with the stipulation that it is to be understood as relativized to particular moral codes. If there are no absolute facts about morality, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ would have to join ‘witch’ in the dustbin of failed concepts.”

_first issue:_ Has Boghossian picked the best candidate for a relativistic cousin of absolute right-/wrongness?

In effect, Boghossian is assuming what we called the actual group’s framework way of determining the content of a moral framework. Maybe other ways of determining a moral framework’s content can avoid his argument.

And, even within the actual group’s framework way of determining the content of a moral framework, things might look different if we (for example) take a moral code to be an implicit agreement, as Harman does in “Moral Relativism Defended.”

_second issue:_ What does it mean to say that something “has normative import”?

Inspired by our discussion of the two standard interpretations of Mackie’s argument from queerness, here are two ways of understanding what “normative import” could come to.

On the first way, to say something has normative import is to say that it has motivational import: to say that it brings with it motivation to do things. But in this sense, “Eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus” may well have normative import for Hindus, especially if we think of a moral code as a Harman-style implicit agreement.

On the second way, to say that something has normative import is to say that it is reason-entailing. But, given a theory that ties what one has reason to do with one’s actual or potential desires, “Eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus” may well entail that Hindus have a reason not to eat meat, especially if their having a given moral code is partially constituted by their having certain desires.